
Appendix H
“Changing Role of the Corps of Engineers-1970-1980”
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Changing Role of The Corps of Engineers-1970-1980

I was asked to write about the water resource program during my term as Chief of Engineers 1976-1980. In a way, this is like discussing the last half of a one-mile race-it overlooks the start. So, I will take some liberties and extend the period from 1970-1980 during which I became and remained involved daily in the Civil Program and the Corps of Engineers as it accommodated itself to major shifts in national policies toward environment cost-sharing, etc. The backdrop for measuring these changes was my earlier experience in Savannah and Tulsa Districts during the “heyday” of federal investment in water resource programs.

In the early sixties a good economic analysis and a strong benefit-to-cost ratio were the best assurances of success in one of the bi-annual “omnibus” bills. These successes were also the fruits of strong local support and powerful representation in the U.S. Congress which were then in full bloom in many areas of the nation. None more evident than in the region of the Arkansas and Red Rivers. As Tulsa District Engineer at that time, there was a real challenge in meeting and fulfilling the federally legislated project load and I suppose some people thought the program would last and last for years if not forever. But soon thereafter the local support began to wane, congressional power for water resource development weakened, and national priorities were modified to the point that by 1980, U.S. Government’s investment in new water projects had dried up and we were in the middle of a 15-year hiatus in the authorization process.

To understand the reasons for the “holiday” from new public work and the basis for certain concurrent changes, we need to reflect briefly on the causes of weakened local and national support for such investments. First, by 1970 the national water program was well advanced toward realization. New projects were spottily scattered across the country and, as a group, less attractive than the projects already authorized. Next, much of all public works already in place was beginning to need major rehabilitation. Also, growth and development were pressing against virgin America, causing, in many areas, a reduced quality of life; and, the U.S. economic situation was entering a tough period. But, whatever the reasons, the fact remains that the water resource development program was an early casualty of new national priorities for environmental and economic attention. The extent and seriousness of its wounds are still being evaluated almost two decades later and as with most sudden and long term illness, major adjustments in lifestyle occurred.

The first major impact came with the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act in late 1969. This sweeping legislation was 10 years too late, in my opinion; and, therefore, was imposed summarily rather than gradually and efficiently. In one

moment every project was in non-compliance, and new starts suddenly found themselves at the foot of a steep climb which was obscured by the uncertainty of how to proceed to the top. Seven years later President Carter announced his famous “hit list” which, in spite of how it seemed to many, had the cleansing effect of forcing once and for all a total review of every project. This review put to rest the many questions about old projects and allowed attention to turn to newer problems. In the meantime, several projects were stopped, to include the Cross Florida Barge Canal; scores challenged, delayed and often changed, L&D 26, Truman, New Melones, **Tenn-Tombigbee**, Gallipolis, etc.; court cases flourished; **EIS’s** became a household word; costs rose; and the decentralized character of doing business constrained as regulatory and permit requirements grew. NEPA even spawned a Brookings Institute study of the Federal activities to determine: “Can Organizations Change?” Since the programmatic system had changed, the management had to adjust or lose. Gen. Fred Clarke, then Chief of the Corps of Engineers, saw the need and, because of the unique military/civilian organizational character of the Corps of Engineers, was able to redirect policy and indoctrinate new Corps District and Division leaders quickly and accordingly. The changes which ensued within the Army Corps of Engineers have impacted the agency structure and procedures from top to bottom and these changes have been felt and have left their imprint throughout the entire water resource management scene both in the U.S. and, to some extent, worldwide.

Two side effects grew out of the NEPA.

- First was the flurry of effort to challenge the authority of the executive agencies to proceed with various elements of the water program. Lock and Dam 26 was delayed on the authority issue as much as environmental; the final court case on the Tennessee-Tombigbee was founded in the exercise of authority by the Secretary of the Army; the Cross Florida Barge Canal provided the platform for testing the President’s authority to impound congressionally appropriated monies. These ordeals in themselves, while painful, have clarified the future of using executive authority to implement certain existing water resource or related laws.

- . Second, the economic factors used to justify projects had a new **partner—environmental** effects. These partners did not always get along too well; however, what appeared to be an “unfriendly” takeover early in 1970’s has evolved into a rather smooth affiliation in the mid-1980’s.

Environmental policy slowed water resource development, and the follow-on attitudes toward traditional national economic policy for water programs stopped the program cold. Only within the past year has legislation containing new investment criteria given us reason to look for resumption of new water resource work.

Cost sharing, which was at the heart of the economic issue, has been integral to water resource development at least since the Flood Control Act was passed in 1927. It has taken a variety of forms and degrees as laws and policies were enacted for water supply, recreation, hydropower, etc. Navigation's particular exclusions came under renewed assault in the mid-1970's and the attacks strengthened as the national economic situation worsened and means were sought to transfer more costs from the federal government to others, that is state and local governments and private business. By 1972, "let the beneficiaries pay" had become a litmus test in the office of Management and Budget and other places in the Federal arena. While this attitude had little effect on water project formulation at the Corps field level, it became a true factor for delay above the Office of the Chief of Engineers. For several years, new projects which had passed all the tests and consequently were recommended for authorization never made the trip up Capitol Hill to the Congressional Committees. Consequently, the amount of new work declined and existing older projects continued to deteriorate as they served out their programmed life. As 1980 arrived, the funding for the O&M element of the budget passed the construction element for the first time and signalled that the character of the Corps had become considerably different than in the glamour days of the mid-1960's.

Finding a way through this shelving process proved difficult and tedious and often targeted on the tough issues of sharing costs for constructing and operating navigation projects. As it turned out, well over a full decade was required to legislate the new cost sharing rules. During this period other lesser changes were occurring under the banner of "privatization." The Corps looked to private enterprise to take over some portions of traditional Corps workloads-hopper dredging became a new private investment, more recreation activities and certain plant operations were contracted out, greater percentages of engineering and design were passed to others, constructive management contracts became acceptable, private investors were allowed to add power at existing Corps of Engineers projects and federal lands, to name a few.

As already intimated, changes in national and economic policies and priorities had major impacts on the Corps of Engineer procedures. More than that, however, were the effects on the type of work itself. The decline in public works came at a time when other engineering roles for the U.S. were rising at home and abroad. Some examples include the growth in the U.S. Military program, the interest of other nations in U.S. public works expertise, American at home concern for waste water, hazardous waste and energy matters, infrastructure and safety problems.

The Corps of Engineers was called upon on numerous occasions to address the engineering requirements of such programs. At the same time, the Corps did take time to study comprehensively and report to the nation on the national hydropower potential and the description of the first class water transportation system it needs and deserves.

As a consequence of these efforts, the capability and capacity of the Corps of Engineers to return to active development of our water resources has remained intact and is ready for the work which will appear rapidly as the new Water Resource Development Act is implemented.

As in the past, the future will have its share of major issues. But unlike the recent past, the immediate future will be one of getting back to work, of more activity, and of “doing,” and that is exciting. For the longer view, a couple of presently suppressed issues will surface and must be resolved.

- . What is the role of the Federal Government in the Water Resource Field? Should it not look to the long term needs of our people and development of our resources? The current policies seem to be concentrated on short term matters.
- . How can we upgrade the efficiency of the systems built piecemeal by both federal and non-federal agencies over the past 50-60 years?
- . What is our national water supply plan?

I’m sure more and possibly deeper issues than the above will emerge in the next decade; however, I doubt that any issue, or combination of issues, will have greater effect or a more far reaching impact than the environmental and economic concerns of the public and the resulting national policies adopted by the U.S. government between 1970 and 1980. While the water resource program has been seriously ill during much of the time since 1970, it has survived and has an excellent chance for full recovery and good health as we look to the future.

The Corps of Engineers has experienced major changes right along with the water resources program. The Corps similarly is also enjoying its best health of many years and is ready and anxious to be a major player in Building Tomorrow-Today. One thing is clear: The future of the Corps of Engineers and the national water program continue to be interrelated as they have been for over 200 years of America’s growth and strength. The Corps cares. Essayons!